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Language Policy, Ethnic Politics, and Identity Formation: A Comparative Study of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

Language policy plays a significant role in shaping ethnic politics and identity formation in multilingual societies. In South Asia, language policies relating to administration, education, and public institutions have profoundly influenced political mobilization, cultural identity, and inter-ethnic relations. Tamil Nadu in India and Sri Lanka provide important comparative cases where language policy emerged as a central political issue. While Tamil Nadu developed a distinct regional linguistic identity through resistance to Hindi imposition and the adoption of a bilingual Tamil–English framework, Sri Lanka implemented the Sinhala Only policy, which generated tensions between the Sinhala majority and Tamil minority communities. The objectives of this study are to examine how language policy influences ethnic politics, to explore its impact on identity formation, to compare the outcomes of Tamil Nadu's bilingual language framework with Sri Lanka's Sinhala Only policy, and to identify the relationship between language policy and ethnic mobilization. This study adopts a qualitative comparative research design based on secondary data analysis. Data were collected through a systematic review of academic databases, books, journal articles, government reports, and historical documents using predefined search terms related to language policy, language-in-education policy, ethnic politics, and identity formation. The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns and policy outcomes. The findings reveal that language policies significantly influence ethnic politics and identity formation. Tamil Nadu's bilingual Tamil–English framework reinforced regional identity while facilitating political accommodation and social stability. In contrast, Sri Lanka's Sinhala Only policy contributed to the political, educational, and socio-economic marginalization of Tamil-speaking communities, intensifying ethnic tensions and contributing to conditions that facilitated the emergence of Tamil separatist movements. The study concludes that inclusive and accommodative language policies are essential for maintaining social harmony in multilingual societies. Policies that recognize linguistic diversity and ensure equitable access to educational and political opportunities can promote social cohesion and national integration.

Keywords: Language Policy, Ethnic Politics, Identity Formation, Tamil Nadu, Sri Lanka, Language-in-Education Policy

INTRODUCTION

Language is a powerful social and political institution that shapes identity, social integration, and political participation. In multilingual societies, language policies often extend beyond communication and become instruments through which states manage cultural diversity, distribute opportunities, and define national identity. Consequently, language policy has frequently emerged as a source of political mobilization, ethnic contestation, and identity formation. The experiences of Tamil Nadu in India and Sri Lanka provide two significant examples of how language policy can influence ethnic politics and social relations.

In Tamil Nadu, language became a central political issue during the twentieth century. Resistance to Hindi imposition began in the late 1930s when the provincial government attempted to introduce compulsory Hindi education. Political leaders such as Periyar E.V. Ramasamy viewed these efforts as threats to Tamil language, culture, and regional autonomy. The anti-Hindi movements gained momentum over subsequent decades and culminated in the mass protests of 1965, which significantly influenced India's language policy. The eventual adoption of a Tamil–English bilingual framework strengthened regional identity while allowing continued access to higher education, administration, and economic opportunities through English. These developments contributed to the



consolidation of Dravidian political movements and reinforced Tamil linguistic identity within the broader Indian federal structure^{1, 6, 9}.

In contrast, language policy in Sri Lanka followed a different trajectory. Following independence, the Sinhala Only Act of 1956 established Sinhala as the sole official language of the state. Although primarily an official language policy, its effects extended to education, public administration, employment opportunities, and political representation. Tamil-speaking communities perceived the policy as discriminatory because it limited their access to state institutions and reduced opportunities available through the educational system. Subsequent educational reforms, including university admission standardization policies, further intensified Tamil grievances regarding educational access and social mobility. These developments contributed to increasing ethnic tensions and played a significant role in the political mobilization of Tamil communities^{3, 11}.

The experiences of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka demonstrate that language policy can generate very different political outcomes depending on institutional arrangements and policy implementation. In Tamil Nadu, language-related conflicts were largely accommodated within democratic and federal institutions, allowing linguistic demands to be expressed through electoral politics. In Sri Lanka, centralized governance and exclusionary language policies contributed to the deepening of ethnic divisions and political conflict.

This study compares the experiences of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka to examine how language policy influences ethnic politics and identity formation. The comparative analysis demonstrates how contrasting language policies can produce divergent outcomes in ethnic accommodation, political mobilization, and identity formation. Furthermore, the study highlights the importance of institutional frameworks in shaping the political consequences of language policy in multilingual societies.

Objectives:

1. To examine how language policy shapes ethnic politics in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka.
2. To analyze the influence of language policy on identity formation in both regions.
3. To compare the outcomes of Tamil Nadu's bilingual Tamil-English framework with Sri Lanka's Sinhala Only policy.
4. To identify the relationship between language policy, educational opportunities, and ethnic mobilization.

5. To derive lessons for managing linguistic diversity in multi-ethnic societies.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative comparative research design based entirely on secondary data analysis. Data were collected through a systematic review of academic databases, books, peer-reviewed journal articles, government policy documents, historical records, and archival materials using predefined search terms related to language policy, language-in-education policy, ethnic politics, regional identity, and identity formation.

The selection of sources was guided by their relevance to the objectives of the study and their contribution to understanding language policy developments in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka from the 1950s to the present. Academic databases such as JSTOR, Google Scholar, and other scholarly repositories were utilized to identify relevant literature. Government reports, policy documents, and historical records were also examined to provide contextual understanding of language policy developments in both cases.

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. This approach enabled the identification of recurring themes relating to educational access, political mobilization, identity formation, and policy outcomes. Content analysis was further employed to compare major policy interventions and their social and political consequences across the two cases. Triangulation of multiple sources was used to enhance validity and reliability.

Although the study provides a comprehensive understanding of language policy and ethnic politics in the selected cases, it acknowledges limitations associated with secondary data, including potential source bias and contextual constraints. Nevertheless, the comparative approach offers valuable insights into the relationship between language policy, political mobilization, and identity formation in multilingual societies.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

The comparative analysis of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka demonstrates that language policy is not merely an administrative or educational mechanism but a significant political instrument that shapes ethnic relations, identity formation, and access to state resources. The findings reveal that the consequences of language policy depend largely on how linguistic diversity is accommodated within political institutions.

The evidence supports instrumentalist perspectives of ethnicity, which argue that political elites strategically mobilize linguistic identities to secure political support and



institutional advantages⁷. In both Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, language became a powerful symbol through which political actors mobilized communities and articulated demands relating to representation, cultural recognition, and political power. Rather than being passive cultural markers, languages functioned as political resources that influenced patterns of collective action and identity formation.

The Tamil Nadu case demonstrates how accommodative language policies can facilitate political integration while preserving regional identity. Resistance to Hindi imposition generated widespread political mobilization, but the subsequent adoption of a Tamil-English bilingual framework allowed linguistic demands to be accommodated within democratic institutions. The presence of India's federal structure further enabled regional autonomy and reduced the likelihood of violent conflict. Consequently, language-based mobilization strengthened Dravidian identity and regional political participation without threatening national unity.

By contrast, Sri Lanka illustrates how exclusionary language policies can intensify ethnic divisions. The Sinhala Only Act extended beyond official administration and affected educational opportunities, public employment, and political participation. Tamil-speaking communities increasingly perceived these policies as institutionalized discrimination. Educational reforms, particularly university admission standardization policies, further reinforced feelings of exclusion. These developments contributed to the conditions that facilitated the emergence of Tamil separatist movements, including the LTTE. Therefore, language policy became closely associated with broader struggles over citizenship, equality, and political representation.

The comparison also highlights the significance of institutional arrangements in determining policy outcomes. India's federal political system created opportunities for negotiation, compromise, and regional accommodation. Linguistic grievances were largely channelled through electoral competition and democratic processes. In contrast, Sri Lanka's centralized governance structure limited opportunities for meaningful accommodation, contributing to the escalation of ethnic tensions. This suggests that the political consequences of language policy depend not only on linguistic choices but also on the institutional context within which those policies are implemented.

The findings further demonstrate the close relationship between language policy and identity formation. In Tamil Nadu, educational and linguistic policies reinforced a strong regional identity rooted in Tamil language, culture, and history. However, this identity largely developed within the framework of the Indian state. In Sri Lanka,

language policies contributed to the strengthening of both Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and Tamil ethnic consciousness, producing increasingly polarized identities. These contrasting outcomes indicate that language policy can either promote inclusive identity formation or reinforce ethnic boundaries depending on its design and implementation.

Another important observation concerns the relationship between language policy and educational access. Educational opportunities often serve as pathways to employment, social mobility, and political participation. When language policies affect educational access, they also influence perceptions of fairness and social justice. The Tamil Nadu experience demonstrates how bilingual educational arrangements can preserve cultural identity while maintaining access to wider opportunities. Conversely, the Sri Lankan experience illustrates how perceived inequalities in educational access can contribute to political grievances and ethnic mobilization.

Overall, the comparative evidence suggests that inclusive and accommodative language policies are more likely to promote social cohesion than policies based on linguistic exclusion. The experiences of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka demonstrate that language policy can function either as a mechanism of integration or as a source of ethnic polarization. Policymakers in multilingual societies should therefore recognize linguistic diversity, ensure equitable educational opportunities, and create institutional mechanisms capable of accommodating competing linguistic interests. Such approaches can contribute to social stability, democratic participation, and long-term interethnic harmony.

MAJOR FINDINGS

1. Language policy significantly influences ethnic politics by shaping access to education, political participation, public employment, and cultural recognition. In both Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka, language became an important political resource through which communities expressed collective interests and political demands.
2. Tamil Nadu's bilingual Tamil-English framework reinforced regional identity while facilitating democratic political accommodation and social stability. The policy preserved Tamil linguistic and cultural identity while ensuring access to educational and economic opportunities through English.
3. Sri Lanka's Sinhala Only policy contributed to the political, educational, and socio-economic marginalization of Tamil-speaking communities. These developments increased perceptions of exclusion and contributed to conditions that



facilitated the emergence of Tamil separatist movements and heightened ethnic tensions.

4. Political Institutional arrangements significantly influenced policy outcomes. India's federal political system enabled linguistic accommodation and regional autonomy, whereas Sri Lanka's centralized governance structure limited opportunities for compromise and intensified ethnic grievances.
5. Inclusive and accommodative language policies promote social cohesion, democratic participation, and national integration, whereas exclusionary language policies may reinforce ethnic boundaries, deepen social divisions, and contribute to political conflict.

CONCLUSION

This comparative study examined the relationship between language policy, ethnic politics, and identity formation in Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka. The findings demonstrate that language policy extends beyond communication and education to become a significant factor influencing political participation, cultural recognition, social mobility, and intergroup relations in multilingual societies.

The comparative analysis reveals that contrasting language policies generated different political and social outcomes. Tamil Nadu's bilingual Tamil-English framework strengthened regional identity while facilitating democratic accommodation and political stability. By allowing linguistic aspirations to be expressed within democratic institutions, the policy contributed to the consolidation of regional political participation without generating large-scale ethnic conflict. In contrast, Sri Lanka's Sinhala Only policy contributed to the political, educational, and socio-economic marginalization of Tamil-speaking communities, increasing ethnic tensions and contributing to conditions that facilitated separatist political mobilization.

The study further highlights the importance of institutional arrangements in shaping the consequences of language policy. India's federal structure provided mechanisms for accommodating linguistic diversity through regional autonomy and democratic negotiation. Conversely, Sri Lanka's centralized governance system limited opportunities for accommodation and intensified perceptions of exclusion among minority communities.

The findings support instrumentalist perspectives of ethnicity, which suggest that political actors strategically mobilize linguistic identities to secure political support and institutional advantages. The evidence indicates that language policy can function either as a mechanism of integration or as a catalyst for ethnic political realignment depending on the manner in which it is formulated and implemented.

The comparative analysis demonstrates that inclusive language policies are more effective in promoting social cohesion than exclusionary approaches. Policymakers in multilingual societies should therefore adopt flexible and accommodative language frameworks that recognize linguistic diversity, ensure equitable educational opportunities, and facilitate democratic participation. Such policies can reduce ethnic tensions, strengthen national integration, and contribute to long-term political stability.

The experiences of Tamil Nadu and Sri Lanka offer important lessons for multilingual societies worldwide. The successful management of linguistic diversity requires not only inclusive language policies but also institutional arrangements capable of accommodating competing linguistic identities while ensuring equal opportunities for all communities.

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